

2006 ADDRESS BY SPEAKER ROD JETTON

The Welfare of the People

Good afternoon to all of the new and returning members, staff and special guests.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Take a brief moment and look at the Latin words inscribed on the Dais before me. In English, they translate to:

“Let the welfare of the people be the supreme law of land.”

As you know, that is our state motto. As we enter the second regular session of the 93rd General Assembly, I think it is prudent for us to reflect and consider the meaning of our state motto. We should also consider the obstacles to reaching that idealistic goal.

In preparing my remarks for today, I thought about all of the things that I have seen during my five years of service in this body, which have kept us from achieving the goal of making our state motto a reality, and I came up with these four:

1. Party influences.
2. Regional interests.
3. Political self-interest.
4. And personal conflict.

In this election year, the temptation for all of us to put politics and party above good policy will be strong. The desire to fund new programs for your district or region will be even greater. The need to have a bill passed with your name on it to help your re-election will be hard to resist. And all of these things could make personal conflict more likely.

We have all seen these types of obstacles put a halt to legislation that would have promoted the welfare of all Missourians. Party influences should not cause us to do things that we feel are not right. Political self-interest should not cause us to promote bad policy. And personal conflict should not cause us to kill good legislation.

I want all of us to do what we believe is the right thing. And I want each of us, both Democrats and Republicans to come together and vigorously debate the laws that affect all Missourians.

One year ago, I stood before this body armed with proposed rule changes to be agreed upon by both parties. To the surprise of many, we actually implemented those rule changes, and created a much more professional and open environment. As Democrats and Republicans, we

actually worked together to pass good legislation. And we engaged in fair, honest and vigorous debates on the key bills that passed this House.

Was it perfect? No.

Did anyone ever lose his or her temper? Yes.

Did party, personal and regional interests sometimes slip in? Occasionally.

But overall, we had one of the most productive and historic sessions in memory.

I have to give credit to the Gentleman from St. Charles, Dempsey district, for the professional manner in which he conducted the floor schedule and kept the minority informed.

And credit must also go to the Gentleman from Boone, Harris district, for his willingness to help settle disputes when they came up.

In 2005, we had a session where we treated each other like friends, respected the other's intentions and knew that we were all here to do our very best to improve this state.

Because of this, we were able to keep the promises that we made before being sworn in.

FIRST, WE KEPT OUR PROMISE TO MAKE EDUCATION OUR NUMBER ONE PRIORITY – We passed a new foundation formula that added \$113 million for our children's education last year. This year we will fully fund the foundation formula by adding an additional \$137 million.

SECOND, WE KEPT OUR PROMISE TO IMPROVE THE ECONOMY – After last year's historic session, our state's unemployment rate dropped to its lowest level in four years. In August, Missouri's employment increased at the second fastest rate in the country, and we were fourth in number of jobs created with over 13,000 new jobs. From January to November of 2005, Missouri industry created more than 28,000 new jobs. That's 28,000 more citizens who have a job, who are paying taxes and who are providing for their families. And to think that just two short years ago Missouri was losing more jobs than almost any other state in the country.

THIRD, WE KEPT OUR PROMISE TO PROTECT OUR FAMILIES – Meth lab busts are down 21.4% from last year, proving that our aggressive approach to the problem is working. And in the St. Louis area, violent crime was reduced by 46%. And thanks to our new DWI laws, drunk driving incidents in Missouri are decreasing.

FOURTH, WE KEPT OUR PROMISE TO SPEND YOUR TAX DOLLARS MORE WISELY – We finished the last fiscal year \$124 million in the black. And this year we're at a 4.9% growth rate, which is well above the 1.0% growth rate we need to meet the growth in the budget. The changes we made to improve Missouri's economy are working.

Now, the policy experts said we could never fix Missouri's fiscal mess without a tax increase. They told us it was impossible to reform state government and improve the business climate without raising taxes. Well, I am here to tell you, our economy is improved, more people are working and Missouri state government is much more efficient and effective than it was just one year ago. Today, we have more Missourians paying taxes, not fewer Missourians paying more in taxes. So despite what the experts said, we did it without raising your taxes!

These are accomplishments that all of us can, and should take credit for. All of you are responsible for this success. I can assure you that the bills we passed last year only worked because we had both sides of the aisle debating, inquiring and, yes, even compromising to get to the final product. And ultimately, the bills we passed were better because of it.

Today, as the elected leader of this body, I want to lay out my thoughts about what we should work to accomplish in this new session.

To begin, we need to provide energy assistance for our poorest citizens. We all know that heating costs have increased dramatically. We need to make sure that our senior citizens are able to heat their homes without having to sacrifice the foods and medicines they need. We must quickly take the extra taxes collected from higher gas prices and put the excess revenue into a fund that will help seniors pay their higher heating costs.

Second, we must reinstate and reform the MAWD program. Last session, we passed a Medicaid reform bill that put a cap on how much a person could earn and still qualify for Medicaid. That legislation kept the disabled employees at sheltered workshops and VIP Industries from being able to continue to work and qualify for Medicaid benefits. Working in sheltered workshops and VIP Industries gives these individuals a sense of purpose and adds to their quality of life. The income they earn is not a lot, but that job gives them something to look forward to each and every day.

We passed a bill at the end of last session that would have fixed the problem and allowed these Missourians to keep working and still qualify for Medicaid. Unfortunately, the bill died in the Senate. We need to pass it again quickly at the beginning of this session.

Third, in 2005 the U.S. Supreme Court pushed the issue of eminent domain to the forefront. This session, we need to pass reforms that will protect our homes, but still allow the use of eminent domain for the good of the public;

to build roads, put up utility lines and improve blighted areas. However, it is never right for the local, state or federal government to take someone's family home just so another private citizen can turn a quick dollar.

Fourth, this session Missouri must pass Jessica's Law to deal with child sex offenders. Unfortunately, most sexual assaults are committed by repeat offenders. We need to keep track of these criminals to make sure our children and families are kept safe. Jessica's Law would require a 25 year sentence for first-time offenders convicted of child sex crimes. In addition, upon release, convicted sex offenders must wear electronic tracking devices 24 hours a day. This way,

law enforcement personnel will always be able to tell where these most violent criminals are, and our children can live and play without fear.

And finally, this body must pass meaningful insurance reform. In today's society, it is vital that everyone have health insurance they can count on.

While we have worked to pass tort reform to crack down on junk lawsuits, we also must make sure the insurance companies understand and fulfill their responsibilities. We need to make health insurance more affordable for all of our citizens. This year we will take on the medical malpractice insurance companies and help all of our citizens have access to quality healthcare.

Some may scoff and say we can never work together and put people before politics.

And you may be sitting here today thinking the very same thing; saying to yourself, "In an election year it will never happen."

But I choose to think that we can. I choose to hope that it is possible. And I know that if we will only try, if we will only strive for the goal, then the people of Missouri will be better. Because in striving to be the ideal deliberative body, we will be much closer to the mark than had we sat back, never tried and said it wasn't possible.

And when we achieve our goals, we will keep Missouri moving forward by protecting citizens' homes and property, by improving the access and quality of their healthcare, and by providing a hand up to those that need it.

Thank you, and may God bless the members of the 93rd General Assembly!